Religion for the "Now Generation"
Romans 5:1-11
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At a retreat last week for the ministers of Crawfordsville Presbytery, I had the privilege of hearing Dr. Lowell Colston, a leading authority in the field of Pastoral Care. Dr. Colston, among many other things, called our attention to what I consider to be two very important observations about 20th century American man.

First, he reminded us that we are very much inclined to get involved in symbols, to the degree that the symbols become more important to us than the reality they are supposed to symbolize. Consider, for instance the American Flag as a symbol, the word "patriotism" as a verbal symbol, and the actual reality -- the love for and loyalty to the nation these symbols are supposed to represent. The fact is that many people are so pathologically obsessed with the symbols that the reality is totally lost. This week our community will be visited by a leading spokesman for the John Birch Society. And while it is probably unfair to prejudge, if Mr. Griffin is typical of others who speak for his organization, he will wave the flag a lot and use the word patriotism as frequently as possible and then proceed to encourage his listeners to treat the constitutional structures of the nation with utter contempt.

We get overly involved with symbols -- at the expense of reality. I am reminded of the comment by J. S. Whale, a very articulate theologian, that the greatest danger to Christian theology comes from scholars who stay in their studies writing laboriously about the words "redemption" and "reconciliation" without ever having felt redeemed or reconciled as an experienced reality.

The second important thing Dr. Colston said was that most of us are conditioned to avoid, at all costs, an expression of or an encounter with very deep human feelings. And, as if to document the truth of his thesis, the assembled ministers acted according to the script. In the course of one discussion a young minister mentioned his admiration for John R. Fry, controversial pastor of Chicago's First Presbyterian Church. An older pastor expressed his disagreement with a little passion, and both men got angry.

The group then performed as Dr. Colston said it would. We shuffled and coughed and did everything humanly possible to change the subject. That is, we managed to avoid deep feeling, in this case anger.

You and I become embarassed when in a group someone begins to express deep feelings. We will go out of our way to avoid someone in a crisis because we can't handle the profound depth of emotion to which we will be exposed. We don't know how to handle another's grief and sadness; we can't bring ourselves to take the worries of our friends seriously; we don't know how to share and express great joy and happiness.

These are two important truths about us -- we avoid reality by involving ourselves in symbolism; and we don't know how to handle deep feelings. And I am convinced that these two contemporary characteristics are very much related in a universal human tendency to look for fulfillment and meaning sometime in the future, but never in the present moment -- the "Now". I would call it "When - my - ship - comes - in - ism", and it is expressed, and has been expressed historically, in a life style that is more waiting than living, more anticipating than experiencing.

Philosophically "when my ship comes inism" has taken concrete form in a number of social movements. Communism looks ahead to that great day when the class system will be gone, the state will evaporate, and all men will live in a proletarian utopia. Social Darwinism looked forward to the day when the evolutionary process would produce a world full of happy, well adjusted people and institutions. Neitzche talked about the future emergence of the "Superman". Hitler pined for a 1000 year Reich. And religion, traditionally has pointed to an after-life. In the religious context, the ship comes in -- in heaven. Word symbols like peace, joy, love, salvation, are just concepts to be talked about, not experienced until life is over.

Personally, we are caught in a culture that has taught us that the meaning of life is in waiting and planning and preparing for tomorrow. The popular litany "I wish I knew then what I know now" really means -- "then -- whenever it was -- I was consumed with getting where I am now. And having arrived -- it isn't nearly what I thought it

was going to be. So I should have enjoyed myself instead of longing for future fulfillment." The college student counts the days till graduation. The young executive lives for the next raise and promotion. Harried parents long for the freedom that will accompany their children's maturation. Middle age people look forward to retirement. And the result is an entire life cycle of waiting -- waiting for fulfillment, happiness, meaning, satisfaction -- on the premise that whatever those words mean -- they will be experienced sometime in the future but not now.

Enter the "Now Generation". All of a sudden we are confronted by a whole culture within a culture that isn't buying any of it: a generation that wants so desperately to document their rejection of "when my ship comes in ism" that nothing is too absurd, too outlandish, too shocking, if it drives home the point. The theology of the "Now Generation" is that it is a denial of life to be consumed with banking today for tomorrow's withdrawal. Participation, contribution, fulfillment - happens now, or never. Human experience is now -- not later. Human feeling -- emotion is to be felt and experienced with intensity and is not to be subdued. And so psychedelic colors are so bright that our eyes hurt. And blaring acid rock is amplified so greatly that our ears hurt. Minds must be bent and expanded with drugs in order to experience and feel more. Soul music pours out the deepest human feeling. Sexuality is not only celebrated, as it should be, but defied and glorified, and taught to be experienced now by anyone and everyone.

And the good old "when my ship comes iners", which includes most of us here today -- and everyone over thirty, simply shake our heads and long for those simpler, quiet days of yesteryear. Sometimes for good reason. The "Now" mentality has given rise to excesses aplenty. In fact, human existance is far more than being titillated and stimulated every minute. And in the final analysis, the "experience everything now" mentality may be as phony as the "when my ship comes in ism" that it hopes to supplant.

But mostly, we shake our heads and feel threatened and sometimes frightened because we simply cannot cope with the whole concept that life is to be lived and celebrated now, not tomorrow; that significance and meaning must be derived from what is happening now,

not what we hope to do someday; that human feeling is good and to be enjoyed and expressed, never subdued and suppressed.

And at this point our discourse shifts from sociology to theology; from the "now" of 1969, -- to the eternal now of God's coming among men in Jesus Christ. The text for this sermon is in your bulletins and I'd like to have us look at it together.

William Barclay has translated it a little differently from the King James Version and Revised Standard Version, on the basis of the most recent studies of the Greek used at the time Paul wrote the words, "Since we have been put right with God -- let us enjoy peace". Since we are "in Grace" - let us glory in our hope." "Let us find a cause for glorying in our troubles." "Hope does not prove an illusion, because God's love has been poured into us."

The striking thing about that passage is its immediacy. There is nothing "ify", or conditional about it. It doesn't urge patience: it doesn't promise peace and happiness in some far distant future. It talks about the "Now". "Let us have peace." "Let us rejoice." "Let us glory." Not later -- now!

I expect that two rather familiar phenomena were happening in the early church. I expect they were doing a lot of talking about words like "peace" and "love" and "hope" and "joy", without it ever occuring that these word-symbols represented experiences that were available in the present. I expect also that religious mentality of those early Christians prevented them from accepting the Gospel as a gift - and that they looked for salvation in the future rather than experiencing it in the present.

Many of them were good Jews, remember. All of them were the heirs of a religiosity that set God against man, and taught that man's obligation was to work and earn the grace and love of God. They believed that the righteousness of God demanded that they take on themselves the responsibility for winning salvation. The gap between God and man, between heaven and hell, between salvation and damnation could be crossed only by obedience to a religious law -- doing certain good things -- avoiding other bad things. The hoped-for result was a reward in heaven. If religious faith caused trouble and

suffering those were to be stoically born in the knowledge that at least it all will be over soon. The early Christians, that is to say, were indulging in "when my ship comes in ism."

But Paul saw things differently. Salvation is something men experience now -- not just in the future. The peace of Jesus Christ is experienced now in the midst of life's hum drum and suffering. The gap between God and man has been closed. The forgiving act men were trying to perform themselves had already taken place.

One New Testament commentator summarizes this radically good news as follows:

"Our peace with God has been secured: let us possess and enjoy it. We have actually been given access to God's gracious favor and we are actually standing in it; let us realize our situation and be glad. Let us inwardly be what we are in objective fact. Let us actually be the justified, acquitted persons we are. The essential redeeming, reconciling work has been done -- it has been done for us! The enmity has been overcome. God has restored us to our true place within his family. Let us rest and rejoice in him." (John Knox, Life in Christ Jesus, p. 17)

The Good News which St. Paul so gladly proclaimed, and the Gospel in which we stand today is rooted in our remembrance of the Jesus Christ who lived and died among men, and who arose from his grave to be eternally present in the common life of humanity. That Gospel, as Paul understood, and as we need to understand, is for the "now".

Jesus himself, announced that the Kingdom of God was at hand; not coming in the future -- but in the "now", the present moment. One writer put it this way, "Jesus lived his life in such a way that he encountered every man he met with a radical decision for or against the presence of God in the now. The one thing he kept reminding his hearers was that the expected reality for which they were looking, the delivering event for which they hoped, the reign of God's love for which they yearned was at hand!" (Thomas Oden, The Celebrating Community, p. 97)

That, of course, is the Good News. Our hope has been fulfilled. Our hope for eternal security has been accomplished. We don't have to worry. We don't have to spend

our lives desperately trying to do something pleasing to God and worthy of his love -- or worrying because we're not -- because in Jesus Christ it has been done for us. We can have peace right now.

Men are reluctant to accept that. Men are reluctant to acknowledge their illusions. Men were so reluctant that they crucified him. And today they do not understand.

But to believe in this Lord -- to accept this Gospel means that we are through waiting for tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. It is a Gospel for the "now" in every generation. It means saying "yes" to God's presence in the now. It means a new view of life -- not as a series of days and weeks and years to be endured but as the glorious gift of God to be enjoyed and experienced deeply -- everyday. Amen.

Eternal Father, help us to see the radical newness of the life you give. Help us to lay down our postponed hopes and begin to live our lives, every day, in gratitude and joy and praise. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.